Huot and Lacroix
The Human Deck of Cards

By Robin Dawes

Michel Huot ("Ooh-oh") and Yannick Lacroix ("La-kwah") are full-time magicians from the beautiful Canadian city of Montréal. They are well known in their home province of Québec and have been building an international reputation for humanitarian work as well as for their wildly creative magic performances.

Phil Matlin, owner of Magie Parfait ("Perfect Magic") and organizer of the long-running Magie Montréal magic conventions, describes Michel and Yannick as excellent performers, creators of top-notch comedy magic material – and very friendly guys.

Both Michel and Yannick have flourishing careers as solo performers, but it is their work together (both on and off stage) that has brought them into the spotlight. Their "Human Deck of Cards" act has received standing ovations across the world, and their off-the-wall "Upside Down" act brought the house down when presented at Obie's 4F Convention.

Michel and Yannick agreed to be interviewed by Robin Dawes on behalf of ***The Linking Ring****.*

RD: Bonjour Yannick et Michel, je suis très enchanté de vous homard.

MH: Maybe we should stick to English before you lobster us too much. I'm excited to talk about magic for *The Linking Ring*.

YL: Me too – I hope you have some good questions.

RD: First question: which one is which?

MH and **YL:** I'm the good-looking one.

RD: Thanks. Let's start with some background information. You're both from Montreal. How long have you known each other?

YL: We met in 1995. I was competing in a magic contest and Michel was an audience volunteer during my act. I guess he was excited by what he saw, because he registered for a magic course that I was offering. So he became one of my students.

MH: The best ever.

YL: He was okay. Actually, I admit it – he was one of my best students. But I think he still doesn't know how I did that trick in the contest.

RD: Can you tell me more about your school for magicians?

YL: I try to offer my students a friendly approach by giving them all the knowledge they need to develop their own creative ideas and to build a unique act.

Most of my students are between twelve to seventy years of age. They come from some very different professions. Many of them just want to relax and have fun by performing tricks for their family and friends. They want to learn something new and exciting.

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Michel and Yannick performing the Human Deck of Cards at the 2006 Fédération Français des Artistes Prestidigitateurs in Arcachon, France. PHOTO BY THOMAS THIEBAUT/ VIRTUYALMAGIE.COM

But some of the others are as serious as I was when I started. They want to learn *everything* I know to get into a new exciting magic career. Michel was one of those!

RD: Michel, why did you decide to take magic lessons?

MH: Well, it's pretty much like Yannick said. I had been learning magic on my own for about a year. I attended one of the wonderful Magie Montreal conventions that Phil and Evy Matlin used to run. That was where Yannick was competing – he's too modest to mention that he won the contest! So I signed up and he became my teacher. And we all know the saying! Just kidding. Yannick is a great teacher.

RD: I know you have separate careers, but I'm most familiar with your combined performances at Obie's 4F convention. Those performances (often including Patrice Meunier) are hilarious and surreal. It's like magic from another planet. I want to know – were you kidnapped by aliens?

MH: Actually, we kidnapped the aliens.

YL: I still have one at home. Little Goldorak. He won't leave. It's a bit of a problem. Can we talk about magic, please?

RD: Can you describe your creative process? Is it different when you work together from when you work alone?

MH: This is the way it has worked for all of our acts together: It starts with one idea, then we brainstorm together, then we eliminate, and then we put everything together and have an act. It sounds simple, but believe me it's not.

Depending on where we are in the process, we set out rules. For example at the very beginning we pitch ideas, the two of us (or three or four, if our friends Patrice Meunier or Marc Trudel have joined in). Then we decide which of the ideas mentioned would work best for our style. Then we start the brainstorming. In that process, the word no does not exist. There is no limitation.

Then once the brainstorming is over, we start playing with the ideas we had and eliminate the ones that do not fit. We write everything that is left on a piece of paper and arrange these in order.

Then the practicing starts. This is how we created our Upside Down act where we are lying on the floor with a camera above us. The image on screen looks like we are standing up, and we do magic on the floor.

Yannick and Michel after their 2009 appearance at Magic Live! as the closing act of the 4F show.

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The Human Deck of Cards. PHOTO BY THOMAS THIEBAUT/VIRTUYALMAGIE.COM

It is hilarious even when we "walk," so imagine the rest.

Sometimes also we just goof around. That's been the case for our Siamese Twins act where Yannick and I are in the same jacket. It's always in development. We wear the jacket, we try things, and we go from there.

YL: I should add that working alone is much easier.

RD: Do you perform a lot of shows together?

MH: It is mostly a 4F thing, but we have started doing lectures together, so we get to do a couple of our acts (especially The Human Deck of Cards, which we also perform for "real" audiences). Here in Quebec, we perform probably around five to seven times per year together. Sometimes we are hired together on a corporate gig, but we do our own individual stuff then.

YL: We've also performed together in a few other places. We had the chance to perform at MAGIC Live in Las Vegas, the Congress FAAP at Arcachon (France), the Kentucky Annual Congress, the Algeria International Magic Festival, the CAM Convention in Kitchener, The Magic Circle in England, and the Journée Magique in Paris. Next year we hope to be invited to perform together in Japan.

RD: That reminds me of something I know our readers all want me to ask: What is your favourite breakfast food?

YL: Are you kidding us? That's your question?

MH: I am ignoring your question, which I think you stole from *People Magazine*. Ask us a real one.

RD: Errr…okay. What is the best thing that has changed in magic in the last ten years? What is the worst?

YL: That's more like it. The best thing is that magic is more contemporary than it used to be. Magicians use more borrowed objects and fewer strange artifacts than we did in the past. It becomes more interesting for the average audience.

The worst thing is all the very bad "simili teachers" ("fake teachers") on the Internet that do not help someone interested in learning to perform good magic. The only thing you'll learn is how the trick is done, but you have no idea of how it can be presented in a way to be interesting. Unfortunately, it is the new generation that is most captured by this new approach.

MH: I agree. The fact that now it is easier to obtain information is the best change, but at the same time it is the worst thing, too. I think the Internet makes the whole experience less unique. Everybody now has access to anything. The newbies learn from other beginners on YouTube. For me, it's like learning to play hockey on YouTube – it can't be done. Put on your skates and step on the ice.

RD: Excellent. Next question: What is the greatest magic effect in the world? Why is it great?

MH: This is a tough one. I'd say anything done in the audience's hands, but it

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Michel and Yannick with French mentalist Viktor Vincent.

all depends who performs it. Above the effect, there is the relation you have with your audience. Take the most incredible of effects, put it in the wrong hands, and you have at best a trick. Take an okay trick, put it in good hands, and you have a magic moment.

YL: For me, the most magical thing is when unwelcome visitors disappear from my home. Then finally I can finish my puzzle in peace while watching my complete Little House on the Prairie DVD series.

RD: This is going really well now. Here's a super important question. Who is your favourite: Jeannie or Agent 99?

MH: Totally ridiculous question. Look, let me show you how this is done. Yannick, what motivates you to be a magician?

YL: Excellent question, Michel. The only reason I ever have for performing magic is to make a lot of money. No, seriously, performing magic has been my first passion since I saw Reveen in 1976 at the St-Denis Theatre in Montreal. It was like a revelation to me, and I just wanted to learn everything about this art.

And above it all, I realized that I wanted to be *loved*. Yes I know it may sound a little funny, but I have realized that in every magician I have met, there were the needs to be unique and to be recognized through the specific art of magic.

How about yourself, Michel? What is your motivation?

MH: Them! Now for a longer version of that short answer. Whether you are a juggler, a magician, a musician, a circus act, or whatever, the audience's response is the one thing we are looking for. Also, our job is not to find the chosen card or to get out of a sub trunk in a record time. This is nothing but the method we choose to achieve our goal, which is – for me – to give them the opportunity to escape for a moment.

RD: Okay, I…

YL: Which brings up another interesting question. Michel, what draws you to a magic routine? How do you recognize something that will go into your act?

MH: It has to fit my style. I am not a guy who does the classical stuff like Linking Rings or Cups and Balls. These routines are *great* – they just don't fit my style. For me, if I see that a routine has a lot of potential to have fun with the audience, I'm interested.

YL: That's a really important thing – you have to know what suits you. For me, I also go at it a bit backwards sometimes. When I see a trick, if it is stupid, nonsensical, boring, and nobody laughs, I consider that it has a *great* value for my next project. I can develop the potential.

MH: And now I think we should talk about Magiciens Sans Frontières. How has MASAF affected your views on magic and/or life?

RD: That's Magicians Without Borders, a non-profit group that was founded in 1999 by Fouad Filali, one of Yannick's students. Its goal is to provide support and comfort to children who are victims of war, terrorism, or physical misery. MASAF engages in humanitarian missions in India,

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El Salvador, Lebanon, Algeria, Angola, Brazil, Haïti, Madagascar, and more.

YL: Yes, yes, Robin, please don't interrupt. For this answer I will be really serious because MASAF is an organization that I really care about.

Michel and I have both been with MASAF since the beginning. I have been on missions to many different parts of the world. What I realized is that magic is a universal way to communicate. Even if the show I had to perform was in front of people who didn't understand one word in French or English, everybody was involved and enjoyed the show.

Many arts are really specific from one place to another. The music, the way people dress, the way they dance, and the way they express themselves – all these can be quite localized. But not magic! If you perform good magic, the reaction is the same whether you are in Canada or India or Algeria.

Plus, people in most of the places that I visit with MASAF are *very*, *very* poor. No TV, no access to the Internet. So the youths I perform for are very excited to watch for the first time a magician live doing some magic.

In some of the places I have visited, I have had to adjust my performance. For example in Haïti and in some of the places in Africa (such as Angola), I have to make it clear with the audience that what they are going to see are only *magic tricks*. Because of their beliefs about voodoo and other ideas, they do not give you the chance to *pretend* you have a special power as when you perform in Europe or America. They assume that you really do have the power. That aspect of their reactions does not help them to enjoy the show the way it should be enjoyed.

And above all, I have realized how lucky I am to live in Canada where everything is very, very easy in contrast to the poor situations endured by so many people around the world.

MH: I started travelling with MASAF missions in 2009. Before that, my children were too young. I agree that magicians are perceived differently in other parts of the world. For example, when we are in Algeria, the audience reaction is *crazy* – in a good way! People want to talk to you, touch you, take pictures, and so on.

MH: Robin, you have your hand up. Do you have another question?

RD: Well, I would like to ask…

YL: Too slow! Michel, let's talk some more about the magic festival we co-organize in Algeria.

MH: Good idea. It is an International Magic Festival that is mainly in Algiers (the capital city). Over the years we have invited names like David Sousa, Ta Na Manga, Leon Etienne and Romy, George Saterial, Jordan Gomez, Soma, Victor Voitko, Ouka, the Dressing Flash, Valérie, Kenris and Aurélia, Xavier Tapias, and many others. It's hard to co-organize something far away because we usually arrive there only one day before it begins. Fouad Filali (the founder of MASAF) is the link between the government and us. He is the main person involved in everything that is boring about coping with the government. I take care of booking the international magicians. Once they are booked, our

Yannick Lacroix (left) and students from his magic school, MagieStrale.

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Michel Huot and Mariline Gagné at the end of their Tango act in Algeria, performed for an audience of 5,000.

friend Patrice Meunier takes over the travel planning: visas and plane tickets and so on. On site, I usually handle the sounds and lights and Yannick takes care of everything backstage. We performed for the first five years but we ourselves do not perform anymore.

We have so much fun at the festival. Some years are difficult for a variety of reasons, but we have a ball and people usually want to come back.

YL: Michel, you mentioned your children. I know that family is very important to you. I remember something you said about Dai Vernon. Can you remind me exactly what it was?

MH: Oh, yes. Someone asked me which magician I would have liked to meet and why, and I said I wish I could have met Vernon, for two reasons. First, to thank him for all he has done for our art, and second, to ask if he regretted it. If he had to do it all again, would he do the same thing or spend more time with his kids? I know I am passionate about magic, but I am way more passionate about the people I love. I'm not judging at all, I'm just curious.

YL: Now we have started an interesting game – going back in time. Suppose you could have been born in another time or place. What would you pick?

MH: Actually, I wouldn't. I think this is the best time for me to be alive. How about you?

YL: For me, I would want to be born in 2972. That way I could celebrate a millennium party with all my friends. I fell asleep at the big party in 2000 and missed it all.

MH: Since we are being philosophical, let's talk about the close future. What do you think you will be doing in ten years?

YL: I see us in Las Vegas. We are redecorating Caesar's Palace. We have our personal show, with someone famous like Celine Dion as our opening act. And yourself?

MH: For me, I think the future holds more travel with magic. In ten years' time, my youngest child will be almost thirteen, and I hope she will do magic with me. I would like to organize more festivals in other countries. And I hope I will still be making people smile.

YL: Wow, that's a great answer – I think I will make my answer like yours.

MH: You know, this has been a great conversation but now I am really hungry. Want to come over to my place for pizza?

YL: D'accord. Let's go!

RD: Sounds good to me too! I'll just ... guys? Where'd you go? Hello? Hey guys?

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